ARTICLES / SAGGI

FRONTIERS OF IDENTITY: REPRESENTATIONS OF *ITALIANITÀ* IN CONTEMPORARY NARRATIVE

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Sommario

Il concetto di identità culturale italiana, sempre problematica, è stata complicata ulteriormente da alcuni scrittori, che portano avanti una "politica del locale", contestando nozioni ricevute e omogenee di territorio, identità e autenticità. Recentemente, diversi studiosi hanno cominciato a riflettere sulle implicazioni teoriche e sulle conseguenze derivate dalla crescente produzione letteraria ad opera di scrittori stranieri che scrivono in italiano o di scrittori italiani che operano al confine tra lingue e culture diverse. Per capire il valore e il significato di questa letteratura di frontiera bisogna tener presente il collegamento strettissimo tra migrazione e confine, tra il valicare il confine e il desiderio di tornare indietro. Questo articolo analizza come l'interconnessione tra confini, appartenenze e migrazione sia visibile e rappresentata in racconti di autori particolarmente sensibili alla rappresentazione dello spazio urbano sia come spazio soggettivo sia come spazio aperto alla trasgressione e all'invenzione dell'io. La tesi che viene presentata è che questi autori usano il topos del confine per mettere in discussione discorsi consolidati di appropriazione nazionalistica degli spazi e per esplorare le possibilità aperte da situazioni di frontiera creativamente interpretate e vissute come aree di creolizzazione culturale.

Esiste un filo rosso nella letteratura italiana, che attraversa i secoli, che è: cosa vuol dire essere italiani e perché spesso ci provoca questi sentimenti contrastanti di orgoglio, godimento, ma anche dolore, sofferenza e rammarico. (Scarpa 2000)

The issue of national identity is still the subject of lively debate in Italy, both within academic circles and the media, reflecting the political changes of the post-Cold War era, primarily the rebirth of micronationalisms and regionalisms "both as a political-administrative reality and a civic tradition including cultural and linguistic traits" (Triandafyllidou 2001:83). It needs to be remembered that ever since "the creation of the independent Italian state, the nation has been conceptualised as a community of people living in a territory and sharing a common set of political and cultural traditions" (Triandafyllidou 2001:82). It is from within this definition of a national (Italian) community that we can locate the origins of exclusionary understandings of place that have surfaced in Italian public discourse with the influx of migrants in the 1990s.

Immigration and *Italianità*

In the literature on the subject, it is almost always noted that Italy had become increasingly homogenized in terms of religion, language and culture in the last century and so the presence of visible immigrants came as a shock to Italians (Dal Lago 1999; Ginsborg 2001). The concept of visibility is crucial: immigrants characterised by different physical features, language and religion had been present since the early 1980s:

in prevalenza dalle nostre ex-colonie e da alcuni paesi del Nord-Africa [...] ma si trattava [...] di numeri relativamente limitati, e soprattutto la visibilità di questa presenza, nei

media e per la politica, era minima [...] la grande maggioranza [...] non aveva la sensazione che ci fosse un "problema immigrazione"; pochi pensavano a un[a] [...] "società multietnica". (Balbo & Manconi 1992:20)

By 1990 Italy had become a multicultural society which had to institute laws and take measures to deal with the growing influx of foreigners. Conscious of its migrant past it opened its borders to all those who could be absorbed by the labour market or could otherwise find employment for themselves. Public funds were made available to assist immigrants and an attempt was made to 'regularise' the status of those who had come into the country illegally or without documents. But the transition from a monolingual, largely mono-cultural and mono-religious state to a diverse multicultural society in less than a decade was not a smooth one. As Iain Chambers comments, the influx of foreigners

genera un confine, una frontiera, sia immaginari che effettivi. I limiti imposti, le barriere erette, non creano solamente l'estraneo, che resta fuori: costruiscono, limitano e definiscono la natura stessa di ciò che sta 'dentro'. Ma, oltre a queste divisioni, il passaggio della migrazione comporta il trauma di essere tradotto in un oggetto. Questo trova forzatamente conferma nell'essere successivamente posto ai margini, in una posizione "minoritaria", in quanto migrante, per cui ci si deve interrogare su come le differenze vengono identificate e su come vengono costruite le divisioni. (Chambers 2006)

Most of the immigrants that entered Italy from 1990 onwards came from cultures in which social and cultural life plays out in public spaces. As a consequence, in many urban neighbourhoods the street became the meeting place of migrants living in cramped and overcrowded apartment

buildings. Shopping arcades of major cities (Milan, Turin, Bologna) developed into open-air markets where the traders were mainly North African. Others that helped to change the use and 'look' of public space were the large numbers of refugees from the Balkan wars and the ex-Soviet bloc following the collapse of communist governments (Dal Lago 1999). Arguably, the arrival of these 'visible' migrants has been overblown in the media:

> The issue of immigration brings to the fore the inherent tension that characterises Italian identity: the tension between the principle of solidarity (inspired by the humanist and Catholic traditions) and the concepts of law and order (related to the idea of national sovereignty). Italy is portrayed to be striving for a national civic culture that provides a legal and political framework guaranteeing respect for the individual and freedom within diversity. [...] The press tends to emphasise the different *ethnic origins* of immigrants, who are identified as 'foreigners', 'North Africans' or 'Albanians', and hence distinguished from 'Us', 'Italians', 'Europeans'. (Triandafyllidou 2001:107-108)

In short, migrants were represented as the new epidemic undermining the supposed normal homogeneity and civility of Italian culture.

Narrating cultural identities

Since the 1990s, with the rise of the so-called literature of migration (Parati 1999) questions of ethnicity, nationalism and migration have gained major visibility in the Italian literary context.

> It seems that in Italian society there is a new dimension on the agenda, that of *being an immigrant.* The idea is slowly

and relentlessly entering into the sphere of thought and the "national" narration through the expressive capacity of migrant writers. Such work announces that we are facing a new epoch in which the "foreigner" is on the way to becoming perceived as a "mind" rather than only "hands". (Richter 2006:45)

In his recent publication *Creolizzare l'Europa*, Armando Gnisci advocates the potential for literature to subvert prejudices and overcome indifference and ignorance, for its ability to transport one "dalle parti dell'altro" (2003: 59). My starting point for the discussion of the role of literary narrative in shaping contemporary notions of *italianità* that take account of the 'creolization' of Italian society and culture, is the consideration that social representations often appear in narrative forms (Rubin 1995) that also help to secure the historicity and continuity of the group and of its members (Bruner & Fleischer-Feldman 1996). In this regard, the words of Algerian-born writer Tahar Lamri are inspiring:

> La narrazione è un'esperienza del mondo, una delle poche condivisibili e quindi è per eccellenza un 'luogo' – specie per lo straniero atopos – di relazione e di interazione. Se conosci le mie storie, non mi temi e stabilisci un rapporto con me e questo rapporto sarà il nostro luogo. (Lamri 2006)

In Italy, the ever-problematic notion of cultural identity is being complicated by authors – like Lamri – who practice a 'politics of location', contesting homogeneous notions of territory, identity and belonging. In what follows, I will examine narratives produced both by foreign-born writers who write in Italian and by Italian writers who operate in a frontier-like situation at the intersection between different cultures and languages. The multiplicity and displacement evident in what I will argue is a form of 'nomadic' writing may also be inspired by a

peculiar quality of Italian landscapes (and cityscapes), which, with their uneasy, multilayered coexistence of the old and the new fosters in writers a sort of hyper-environmental self-awareness. The texts selected for discussion employ a topological hermeneutics in which spatiality functions as a symbolic conduit between the plotting of identity constructions and Italian realities.

The Rhetoric of the Cultural Border

A number of contemporary writers, who have achieved both critical and public success have adopted the rhetoric of (cultural) borders as a discursive strategy. Indeed, I would argue that there is a leit motif in Italian literature of "estremi limiti geografici" (Di Grado 2007) and that this leit motif traverses the work of both well-established and new writers who write 'from the frontier'. These include acclaimed foreign-born writers such as Swiss-born Fleur Jaeggy, Hungarian-born Giorgio Pressburger and Edith Bruck; as well as Italian-born writers from 'border cities': Claudio Magris from Trieste, Paolo Maurensig from Gorizia and Giuliana Morandini, from Udine, to name but a few. In addition, the last two decades have seen the emergence of a large group of foreign-born writers who have introduced new subject positions that are responsible for what is arguably the most significant reinvention of Italian literary and cultural geography in recent years: a development that can possibly be attributed to the fact that "the migrant, exile, or voyager not only crosses the threshold into another history and geography but also steps into the role of an itinerant cultural visionary" (Seyhan 2001:14).

Most of the latter group, however, have yet to achieve the kind of critical acclaim that would assure them inclusion in an Italian literary canon and are usually referred to as a separate category of 'migrant' writers. This group, consisting mainly of individuals from non-Western nations, problematises the definition of Italy as 'territorio' by bringing the peripheries of former colonial outposts, and the diasporic cartographies of present refugee and labour migration into the redefined urban landscape.

For me, this implies a need for a revision of Italian identity from inside out and a questioning of the Italian literary canon as traditionally understood. What unites all these groups of authors is the *topos* of the frontier (migration, and, therefore, exile). Often treated as an ambiguous symbol, one defined by social, cultural and ethnic prejudice, rather than geography, the frontier can serve as either a bridge or a barrier (Magris 1999:52).

Of the well-established writers, I have chosen to examine the work of Giuliana Morandini because she is conscious of belonging, linguistically, to an Italian tradition, while at the same time being aware of inhabiting a broader intellectual zone that permeates both edges of the frontier:

> Sono nata sul confine, vicino all'Austria e al mondo slavo, e partecipo alla visione del mondo [mitteleuropea]. [...] L'aspetto distintivo [della Mitteleuropa] è la riflessione sul linguaggio e insieme sulla psicologia. Il confine, dalla geografia e dalla storia viene portato nel mondo interiore. In questa linea, nel riflettere sul confine, sui rapporti tra lingue ed etnie diverse si è alimentata sin dall'inizio la mia scrittura. (Morandini 1998:100)

In her first three novels (*I cristalli di Vienna,* 1978; *Caffè specchi*, 1983; *Angelo a Berlino*, 1987) the female protagonists live in three Central European capitals – Vienna, Trieste and Berlin; each of which presents itself as 'divided city' with a nonlinear topography that Morandini sees as reflecting female consciousness and in which the border becomes "una linea mentale" (Morandini 1995:634). She considers essential

> il fatto che il lavoro sul mondo interno avvenga su una scena di città e l'immaginario personale coincida di volta in volta con immagini della città, soprattutto con problemi culturali e politici della sua storia. (Morandini 1998:99-100)

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All of the protagonists are 'outsiders within' the city, in the sense that they partake of its cultural reality while using the standpoint of alienation to observe the city. The central novel of the trilogy, *Caffè specchi*, is a complex and fragmented work rich in literary, philosophical and psychoanalytic references. The protagonist, Katharina Pollaczek, arrives in an unnamed city to meet with a lawyer about gaining custody of her son, Friedrich, who is living with her estranged husband after their separation. While wandering through the city, she comes across the body of a recently murdered Serbian woman. In a cafe, she meets an orchestra conductor and eventually sleeps with him. These are the concrete events that occur in the novel. Otherwise, the protagonist meanders apparently aimlessly through the streets of the city and along the paths of her disturbed mind: confronted by the barrier of the cultural border: a barrier that a more powerful side constructs to guard its own political power, cultural knowledge and privileges.

In an interview, Morandini explains that the underlying meanings of Katharina's wanderings are revealed by relating notions of feminine identity to the *topoi* of mirrors and cities:

> La figura femminile, o meglio una certa problematica della donna, trova qui vari momenti di identificazione [...]. *Le immagini psicologiche mostrano corrispondenza speculare con immagini della città.* Ma a loro volta queste immagini, pur rese con assoluta fedeltà al modello, sono immagini di una storia culturale e quindi di un immaginario che Katharina ritrova anzitutto dentro di sé. È forse questo il motivo che mi ha portato a non nominare la città, anche se poi è ben riconoscibile. La visibilità della città avviene attraverso il suo sviluppo di idee, di invenzioni letterarie. (1995:635, emphasis added)

The city is recognizable as Trieste both by the reflections in the mirrors of its historic *caffè* and the fleeting yet precise references to its history. The

'real' Trieste is a crossroads of many languages, a cultural intersection of old Empire, a convergence of public and private traumas. Morandini portrays Trieste's heterogeneity, its diversity and its insularity through a condensation of myth, history and desire: she does this by marking out Trieste's topography as a series of shifting boundaries and memory zones, demarcated both spatially and linguistically. The 'standard' Italian of the narrative (representative of the notion of 'territorio'/national space) is disrupted by fragments of impersonal conversations in English from the hotel lobby; the Triestine dialect spoken in the neighbourhoods of the old city and Katharina's childhood memories recounted in Serbian. The multilingual 'sound track' mirrors the different styles of the buildings and monuments and together they serve as a reminder of Trieste's multicultural history and shifts of power.

Katharina becomes the *flâneuse*, moving from site to site, both estranged from and proximate to the other 'citizens'. Morandini's mode of writing recalls the nomadic style which, in Rosi Braidotti's words, is about "transitions and passages … the journey is all about the story-telling" (1995:25) and Katharina's identity is constructed as that of a "nomadic subject". To quote Rosi Braidotti's once again, this is a subject whose "identity is a map of where s/he has already been […] the nomad stands for movable diversity […] [she] does not stand for homelessness, or compulsive displacement […] as Deleuze put it, the point about being an intellectual nomad is about crossing boundaries" (1995:26). It is in this formulation of nomadic subjectivity that acclaimed writers like Morandini – who operate on the borders of two cultures – connect with the new 'migrant' writers, whose texts themselves represent a "cultural borderland". Following Foley (1995), by this I mean the texts representing the psychological and political 'space' created when two or more cultures and races occupy the same territory. The psychological space is the one in which border-crossers struggle with their bicultural or multicultural identities. The political space is created as ethnic groups actively fuse and blend their culture with the mainstream culture, thus achieving a form of cultural creolization. The point of view of the migrant, constituting new

subjectivities, can offer new challenges to the presumed divide between private and public space, and between the objectivity of the city as readable map and the subjective experience of wandering through the city in search of signposts and places of identification. A point vividly made by Mauro Daltin, editor of the journal *PaginaZero*, dedicated to "letterature di frontiera" when he reflects on his personal experience as a 'native' Italian traversing city borders:

> Quando cammino lungo le strade di Trieste mi sembra di essere lontano mille chilometri da casa mia. Quando mi ritrovo lungo le vie di Pordenone provo la stessa strana sensazione. Eppure distano pochi chilometri dalla provincia di Udine, dove vivo e lavoro. Ci sono confini e frontiere invisibili che si attraversano inconsapevolmente ogni giorno. (Daltin 2004)

Historically, the Italian landscape has been particularly sensitive to the phenomena related to the coexistence of different languages and cultures or to the challenges faced by so-called border zones. Melita Richter, a Croatian sociologist and writer who has been living in Trieste since 1980, argues that modern diasporas have effectively contributed to the emergence of what Salman Rushdie calls "translated identities":

> Nella vita di una città come in quella dei suoi cittadini, una progressiva acquisizione di identità nuove diventa un processo del tutto naturale. Questo processo è ancora più visibile per coloro che attraversano i diversi contesti geografici e culturali. Ogni cultura viva cambia e artefici di questo cambiamento sono donne ed uomini, a volte più figli del loro tempo che dei loro padri. [...] In questa città [Trieste] io continuerò a rivendicare tutte le mie identità, tutte quante sono diventate parte di me, quelle ereditate e quelle acquisite: Donna Zagabrese, Croata, Jugoslava, Mitteleuropea,

> Europea, Mediterranea, Continentale, forse Ebrea errante, sicuramente Nomade…e, perché no? Triestina e anche S'ciava! (Richter 2005:20)

Richter notes that the "increasing circulation of subjects in intercultural environments" has given rise to the need for "some sort of *mobile citizenship*, separate from nationality. [...] A diversified space with a plurality of identities around us becomes more and more the normal context of our existence" (Richter 2006:38-39).

Richter's narrative combines cityscape and soulscape and resonates with the view of a national/cultural identity that is manifest in the narratives of Tahar Lamri, in whose work, the metaphor of the journey is a constant presence. Lamri's metaphor extends to the perpetual "pellegrinaggio della voce": the narrating voice entrusted with the task of building bridges between cultures through story-telling and words:

> La scrittura non rappresenta per me un mero nomadismo, in cerca di pascoli letterari, ma rappresenta un pellegrinaggio circolare, dove non è assente lo smarrimento, il saccheggio, la meraviglia, il mito, e, forse, il ritorno verso di sé, o in altri termini più precisi l'eterna perdita della mia propria identità, coltivando in segreto, come i marrani nella Spagna della Riconquista, l'identità primordiale, in un luogo al di là dell'errare. Forse si tratta di una ricerca dell' 'anima plurima' con le sue implicazioni pagane. Scrivere in una lingua straniera è un atto pagano, perché se la lingua madre protegge, la lingua straniera dissacra e libera. (Lamri 2003)

Migrant writers outline a geography that reflects a different, more marginal Italy both spatially and linguistically. Because migrants settle in urban peripheries and in working-class areas, the Italian they learn is often the language spoken by labourers and marginalized people. Multilingualism thus enters migrant literature unexpectedly, via the

appropriation of regional dialects (like Morandini's sound track). Pointedly, Lamri combines Italian, French, Arabic, the Algerian dialect, and the Romagna dialect of Italian in a multilingual text in which the constraint of borders is disrupted by transgressive journeys across languages – allowing both the establishment of an identity and the retention of a distance:

> Per me, scrivere in Italia, paese dove ho scelto di vivere e con-vivere, vivere nella lingua italiana, convivere con essa e farla convivere con le altre mie lingue materne (il dialetto algerino, l'arabo ed in un certo senso il francese) significa forse creare in qualche modo l'illusione di avervi messo radici. Radici di mangrovia, in superficie, *sempre sulla linea di confine*, che separa l'acqua dolce della memoria, da quella salata del vivere quotidiano. (Lamri 2003, emphasis added)

If crossing a border is always a migration of different cultural existences, when a writer chooses a language different from his or her native tongue, the crossing implies the loss of a world that is now transposed into a new idiom. Writing in a non-native language indicates an awareness of having migrated from one place to another, but it also infers an internal frontier between the old and new languages.

Living and Writing in Translation

A recent anthology, edited by Francesco Vietti, demonstrates both how migration has modified the Italian literary landscape and how representations of urban space in Italian literature are dominated by questions of migration and ethnicity and multiple belongings. The city in question here is Torino and what emerges from this collection of writings is that there is a city within a city that deserves to be more fully explored in order for its value to be appreciated. Entitled *In Madrelingua* (2006), the volume consists of 50 poems and stories composed by 50 authors from

around the world but now residing in Torino. The texts are composed in the 'mother tongue' of the author and then translated into Italian, either by the authors themselves or by students and lecturers from the Università di Torino – a process with the programmatic intent of mirroring the "translated identities" of the writers. The project was developed in collaboration with the Centro Interculturale della Città di Torino as "una dichiarazione d'amore e di fiducia nei confronti di questa città" (Vietti 2006b). The declared intent of the project was that of working to overcome social barriers and to cross cultural borders:

> Per fortuna ogni giorno decine di persone si impegnano per un altro obiettivo: abitare la città. E questo significa innanzitutto lavorare per superare il disagio sociale, le barriere e i pregiudizi e che dividono i "quartieri degli italiani" dai "quartieri degli stranieri", le vie dove si passeggia la sera da quelle da evitare dopo il calar del sole, i giardinetti dei bambini da quelli dei "pusher". La Torino "multietnica" non è solo quella dei mercatini o dei ristoranti: è qualcosa di più profondo, di meno folkloristico, di più difficile, ma anche di più interessante e vero. (Vietti 2006b)

Deployed as a description of cultural duality, the metaphorics of border here reminds us that cultural exchanges need to be reciprocal and points to how these can become the "sites of creative cultural creolization, places where criss-crossed identities are forged out of the debris of corroded, formerly (would-be) homogeneous identities, zones where the residents often refuse the geopolitical univocality of the lines" (Lavie & Swedenburg 1996:15).

These paradigms are useful both in attempting to position Italian migrant authors within the Italian literary canon and within debates on the perception of urban space: "Territory is thereby linked with culture, and Italianness is seen as intrinsically related to space. The presence of Others within the national territory upsets the relationship between the nation and

its homeland" (Triandafyllidou 2001:109). In his introduction to *In MadreLingua* Vietti gives a vivid account of how the spaces in the 'now multi-ethnic' city are filled with meaning:

> Camminando per le vie di Torino, come di qualsiasi altre grande città, non si può fare a meno di notare come il territorio sia segnato, fatto proprio, *abitato* dai gruppi di persone che vi risiedono. E il primo [...] simbolo di appropriazione e riconoscimento dei luoghi è il mosaico di parole, lettere e slogans scritti sui muri dei palazzi [...] la selva di volantini e annunci lasciati a scolorire lungo le vie della città. [...] E così i muri della città [...] parlano. Cinese, arabo, rumeno, spagnolo, italiano... a saper decifrare le lingue appese sui pali della luce e sui portoni si possono seguire lunghi percorsi attraverso i quartieri [...] persino raggiungere nella redazione di un nuovo giornale, nella sede di un'associazione culturale o all'indirizzo postale di un concorso letterario. (Vietti 2006a:9-10)

Vietti captures the configuration of objects and events that is also a specific context for our actions, and which, in many of the texts collected in the anthology, is represented by the feeling of "dwelling in transit" (Clifford 1988). This is so for the many types of contemporary travellers, from mobile professionals and 'nomadic intellectuals' to – the more historically embedded – migrants. It is also the case for the 'locals', whose biographies are intimately entwined with the socio-cultural and political economy of place, who see their traditions dissolving and their common cultural expectations vanishing. There is therefore a sense of a global space of cultural connection and dissolution, where local authenticities meet and merge in transient urban and suburban settings (Clifford 1988).

Mapping the territory

The construction of identity and the re-narration of a city raise the question of how the story of that identity can be represented. This in turn raises the issue of whose story is to be narrated, by whom and from which perspective. An innovative perspective is provided by *La straniera* (1999) by Iraq-born Younis Tawfik, which uses a multiethnic Turin as background for an impossible love story between two immigrants. The city is represented through its public spaces, often those spaces associated with social marginalisation, or what Marc Augé (1995) has defined "non-spaces": train stations, undergrounds, peripheral streets and squares. Places such as parks, beaches and *piazze* that are usually locations of normal socialisation, are imbued with a sense of marginalisation in this text. These urban spaces symbolise the limited permeability of Italian society to immigrant groups, outside the context of Catholic charity, and the isolation and ghettoisation to which many immigrants are forced by economic invisibility. It is an invisibility conditioned by illegality and unregulated labour (*lavoro nero)*. In addition, there is criminalisation and the linked issues of drug dealing and prostitution. The scarcity of interior spaces, which are overcrowded or stifling, is in strong contrast to the open architectonic spaces where loneliness dominates.

In his famous essay, "The Stranger", Georg Simmel describes how the stranger "brings qualities into the group that are not and cannot be indigenous to it" (1908/1950:402), thereby offering us a mirror of what we are not but could have become. Simmel also stresses that spatial relations are conditions and symbols of human relations and that social boundaries are similar to spatial borders; a point which takes on material form in *La straniera*. The male protagonist of the novel is a young man from an unspecified country in the Middle East who has a university degree in architecture, a good job, and an apartment in a classy Turin neighbourhood. The female protagonist, Amina, is a young Moroccan woman who struggles against the limits imposed by society (both the Moroccan community and Italian society) and who has been forced into

the world of prostitution – having to roam the streets out of necessity not choice. The representation of the city in *La straniera* thus offers two levels of experiencing the city: the marginal one of Amina, constrained to street, stations and extremely peripheral buildings, and the 'normalised' one of the male character, who has never encountered great difficulties in Italy and who adopts the rhythms of an 'Italian' social network. It is a classical story of impossible love set in a Turin with bars and restaurants owned or frequented by immigrants: a city which has lost the sharp divide between the local and the immigrant, yet still retains strong currents of conservatism and racism, and which exemplifies Simmel's argument that people who are spatially close to each other, but belong to another group, are often socially remote. Needless to say, being spatially close, but socially remote is being neither insider, nor outsider, but "near and far at the same time"; a strange, yet constitutive non-member of a group. These are important themes for the topic migrant writing. On the one hand, we are dealing, in fact, with people who are spatially close, but socially remote because they belong or feel that they belong to another group ('nation'). Being near and far at the same time is what defines the stranger. And this mental distance between here and there might help us to understand the world of the *sapeur,* a key figure in much of the fiction written by North African immigrants in Europe (MacGaffey & Bazenguissa-Ganga 2000). The *sapeur* is a figure of spatial transition, operating in the interstices of larger cultures, a mobile individual who creates ramifying networks extending through time, space and multiple cultures as he circulates between countries in otherwise invisible spaces in and between cities. The discursive strategies conveyed by 'frontier' writers for the representation of urban space are differentiated yet convergent. The city becomes the refraction of global processes of syncretism as well as of the multiplication of differences. It is a place where operations of affiliation and alienation inform and qualify each other. In Younis Tawfik's *La straniera*, the city as a homogenous site has been deconstructed and transformed in many multiple subjective realities. For others, like Morandini, the city is the locus of the interplay between

origin and future, between authenticity and emancipation, between communal identities and individualised self.

The point this paper has sought to work with is this: that it is precisely within a culture of difference, and its legacy, that highly charged border crossings are likely to occur, that people will find forms of agency that help to create a new culture of the city. The city even where it is a space of segmentation or regimentation, is also a space of creolization. The space once defined, only remains thus defined for as long as the individual defining the space remains there. The spaces occupied by the 'visible' migrants visually represent the articulation of a politics of identity poised across multiple spaces and places of identification and belonging: a nomadic identity that asserts its translated reality with striking clarity and precision. Migration is directly and inevitably a process of cross-cultural translation, a passage of movement between different languages, cultures and worlds. This is especially evident in the migrant landscapes of the contemporary metropolis where cultures are always vectors of movement and translation as much as they are modes of being in place:

> Insisto sull'idea che le culture e le tradizioni sono sempre luoghi di traduzione, di trasformazione e di transito; sono luoghi – sia fisici sia immaginati – che forniscono dei linguaggi con cui si possono tracciare diversi percorsi in un mondo-modernità differenziato, eterogeneo, aperto. Tale senso di movimento rende difficile insistere su un'idea fissa e stabile di cultura, che sia quella 'originale' del migrante o quella che lo 'ospita'. Sia il punto di partenza che il punto di arrivo sono investiti dai processi che articolano e trasformano il senso di appartenenza. (Chambers 2006)

Chambers' view conforms to the need for reciprocity advocated by Armando Gnisci when he remarks that the creolisation of Italy is capable of creating a polyphony of voices (2002:61) which could entail a cultural hybridity that is neither assimilation nor rejection but a sort of magnifying

glass to better see what is currently escaping us; a lens both for those arriving and for those hosting. The writers under discussion offer a dynamic articulation of in-betweenness in which decontextualised signs of traditions and origins are re-contextualised within an aesthetics of affirmation that uses particular strategies of representation (topological hermeneutics) to construct particular claims on identity and to articulate ways of belonging.

The representation of urban space offered by the authors under discussion unravels some of the complexities of recent Italian multicultural scenarios: the intersection between notions of *italianità* and its Other, nation and narration, city as site of alienation but also as site of cultural translation, creolization. Thus, they carry out the task identified by Scarpetta as one of the most urgent tasks for contemporary literature, that is, to expose

> il non detto della storia ufficiale, le zone dell'esperienza umana trascurate dagli storici; destabilizzare le certezze, le ortodossie, le visioni precostituite del mondo; esplorare l'altra faccia, il negativo dell'immagine che le nostre società danno di se stesse. (Scarpetta 2003:22)

Through a topological hermeneutics, these writers clearly articulate a cultural identity that is neither wholly Italian (however we define it) nor wholly 'Other' – neither 'here' nor 'there', but embraces multiplicities of belonging – language, geographical, national place, complexities of dual/multiple 'homes'. Effectively, these texts uphold a vision of the city as the elective postcolonial space

> sia che lo spazio urbano rappresenti lo spazio della nazione, sia che venga vissuto a livello individuale come luogo in cui negoziare la propria identità. (De Angelis 2001:41)

If these writers have something in common, it is the way in which they all give expression to a shared contemporary condition: stranded 'on the border', that liminal space between the end of one cultural tradition and the beginning of another, and they all explore new ways of seeing, of understanding (and inhabiting) the world with words. By representing Italy as both a material space and a space of discourse, these writers affirm the heterogeneity of contemporary *italianità.*

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